5.

Universal Toleration recommended.

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SERMON,

PREACHED AT

ST. JOHN's CHURCH,

IN

HACKNEY,

ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 1780,

BY *BENJAMIN CHOYCE SOWDEN.*

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A

SERMON,

PREACHED AT

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH,

IN

WORCESTER,

ON SUNDAY the 12th of JANUARY, 1800.

BRITISH MUSEUM

BY BENJAMIN CHOICE SOMERS.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF SOME OF THE

HEARERS.

TO THE READER.

AFTER the ſubject of Toleration has been ſo largely and ſo ably diſcuſſed by Mr. Locke and other ingenious authors, it would be preſumptuous in the writer of the following ſheets, to ſuppoſe he can offer any new argument in its ſupport. All his aim is more widely to diffuſe the principles which they eſtabliſhed. With this view he compoſed

poſed and preached this diſcourſe; from theſe motives he now commits it to the preſs; and ſhould it be inſtrumental in converting any from that illiberal bigotry which diſgraces religion, the higheſt ſatisfaction will ariſe from the thought, that he has not been uſeleſs to mankind.

ROMANS

ROMANS xiv. 4.

WHO ART THOU THAT JUDGEST ANOTHER MAN'S SERVANT? TO HIS OWN MASTER HE STANDETH OR FALLETH.

TO a man whoſe ſentiments are liberal, and whoſe feelings are humane, nothing can be more ſhocking than the annals of the chriſtian church after the apoſtolic age. They exhibit ſuch ſcenes of tyranny, perſecution, and cruelty, under pretence of promoting the cauſe of truth, that, to judge by its effects, it might be imagined the goſpel were revealed in order to diſturb the peace of ſociety, to render mankind wicked and miſerable: nor can we wonder at the generous and humane infidel, who

boldly diſclaims a religion, which thus ſeems to ſanctify bigotry and perſecution. We there view Chriſtians divided into a thouſand contending parties, each without mercy pronouncing eternal damnation to be the portion of all the reſt, and each ſect, when they prevail, employing the rigor of penal laws, the ſword, and the fire, to make converts to their opinions. We there behold the miniſters of religion uſing all their efforts to inflame the ſpirit of contention, and to animate the fury of perſecution; inſomuch, that for many ages, the title of prieſt ſuggeſted every hateful idea of pride and oppreſſion, of bigotry and cruelty. To promulgate, what was then termed, Chriſtianity, was to promote a moſt nefarious tyranny over the minds and conſciences of men; was to teach them to neglect, and even to violate the moſt ſacred obligations of humanity, for the ſake of ſuperſtitious ceremonies, and a ſyſtem of faith,

faith, abſurd in itſelf, diſhonorable to God, and degrading to man.

Such was the ſpirit, and ſuch were the effects of religion under the uſurpation of Rome; which, till the ſixteenth century, extended its pernicious influence over Europe. The reformation, which was then begun by Luther in Germany, and encouraged by ſeveral eminent men in other countries, delivered ſome nations from the Papal yoke, and, in them, eſtabliſhed perſuaſions leſs ſhocking to reaſon, and leſs unfriendly to the rights of mankind. Still, however, the grand error remained: even Proteſtants cheriſhed a ſpirit of bigotry and perſecution; and though they loudly condemned the church of Rome, for excluding from the hope of heaven all whom they pleaſe to call Heretics; for violating the right of private judgment; and for employing the terrors of the civil power

to induce men to embrace a *falſe* ſyſtem of faith; yet the ſeveral ſects of the reformed church have inculcated a ſimilar bigotry of ſentiment, and have been equally willing to bind the conſciences of mankind in fetters of their own forging: all theſe alſo have thought a few wholeſome ſeverities juſtifiable to prevent men's deviating from what they are pleaſed to call the *true* religion; nor have they ſcrupled to exerciſe them, whenever they had the power. That the clergy, to their ſhame be it ſpoken! have been the chief inſtruments in promoting this diabolical ſpirit, will appear to every one, who is at all converſant with the hiſtory of the German, the Genevan, the Dutch, and the Scotch churches. It were to be wiſhed that the clergy of England could be made an exception to this charge; but the ſeverities exerciſed againſt the firſt diſſenters, and the more recent proceedings againſt Burnet, Whiſton, and Headly,

too

too plainly prove that they have not eſcaped the general malady; and it was a moſt happy circumſtance for the intereſts of religion, that with reſpect to theſe pious and amiable prelates, the wiſdom of government interpoſed, and reſcued them from the cenſure of their bigoted and uncharitable brethren.

But however culpable, in this particular, our anceſtors may have been, we have reaſon to bleſs God that a ſpirit of perſecution is not the vice of our countrymen in the preſent times. The improvements in philoſophy, together with that freedom of enquiry, which is at once their cauſe, and their effect, have taught us to aboliſh abſurd and pernicious prejudices, and to ſubſtitute ſentiments of religion more agreeable to reaſon, more friendly to humanity. It is no more than juſtice to affirm, that the preſent clergy of England, thoſe among

among the rational diſſenters, as well as of the eſtabliſhed church, are, in general, men as eminent for their liberality of ſentiment, and charity of diſpoſition, as they are for their piety and learning. A ſpirit of candor and toleration, was never more univerſal than at preſent: perſons of different, and even of oppoſite opinions, forget their ancient prejudices againſt each other, and agree in a mutual intercourſe of kind offices: the pulpit is no longer degraded to be the ſcene of idle theological debates; but is devoted to the nobler purpoſe of inculcating the obvious principles, and the general practice of piety and benevolence. Even controverted doctrines are diſcuſſed without thoſe hateful animoſities, that poſitive inſolence, and intemperate language, which formerly diſgraced polemical writers. The penal laws againſt diſſenters, which were diſgraceful to a free government, and unjuſtly oppreſſive of worthy and conſcientious

entious men, after being left in obſcurity from the humanity of the times, are at length aboliſhed. The reſtrictions upon thoſe of the Romiſh communion, which a regard to the ſafety of our civil and religious liberties might render neceſſary for a time, are now reſcinded. Every one, whatever be his ſentiments of religion, has now a full toleration, and may worſhip God in the manner beſt ſuited to the dictates of his own conſcience.

Meaſures, ſo agreeable to the genius of the goſpel, and the dictates of humanity, cannot fail of affording the greateſt ſatisfaction to every one, who, animated with the true ſpirit of Chriſtianity, conſiders the virtue and happineſs of mankind as objects of infinitely more importance than the prevalence of any particular tenets. To a perſon of this temper it will give no ſmall concern, when he finds any of theſe generous

rous and chriſtian-like proceedings of government oppoſed by men, whoſe zeal and apprehenſion ſeem, at leaſt in this inſtance, to be greater than their liberality, or their charity; and who, when they endeavour to prejudice others againſt meaſures of toleration, however upright may be their intention, are in fact enemies to the freedom and happineſs of their fellow-creatures.

Inſpired with the moſt ardent zeal for the civil and religious liberties of mankind in general, and of my countrymen in particular, I eſteem it my duty to omit no opportunity of contributing my mite towards their preſervation and eſtabliſhment. For this purpoſe, I ſhall endeavour to explain the foundation and nature of that toleration, which, I conceive, every individual has a right to claim, and which, I apprehend,

apprehend, to be inſeparable from the genuine ſpirit of the goſpel.

Chriſtians, though the profeſſed followers of the Prince of peace, did not long preſerve that unanimity, or that ſpirit of meekneſs and charity, which their bleſſed Maſter ſo ſtrongly recommended. Even in the firſt age of the church, differences aroſe; and it required all the authority of the apoſtles to reſtrain the contending parties within the limits of moderation. Thoſe, who were converted from Judaiſm, were partial to the ceremonial reſtrictions and obſervances of the Moſaical diſpenſation; and, conſidering them as eſſential even to Chriſtianity, were not contented with their own obedience, but wiſhed to impoſe them on their brethren, who, from Paganiſm, had embraced the goſpel. Theſe rejected ſo burdenſome a yoke; and, as the Jewiſh converts treated the reſt with no ſmall

haughtineſs and contempt, the diſpute revived that ſpirit of animoſity, which always ſubſiſted between the Jews and Heathens, and, had not the apoſtle of the Gentiles interpoſed, might have produced conſequences immediately fatal to the riſing intereſts of Chriſtianity.

To this controverſy, and the intolerant ſpirit with which it was conducted, are we indebted for the epiſtle to the Romans: in the former part of which, St. Paul employs the moſt cogent arguments, to prove that the ceremonies and prohibitions, peculiar to the law of Moſes, were aboliſhed by Chriſt, and were, therefore, no longer obligatory. Inſtead of theſe contentions, he recommends to both parties, a ſpirit of humanity, an attention to the ſocial virtues, and, above all, a benevolent, and tolerant diſpoſition. "Let not him that eateth deſpiſe him that eateth not; and let not him

that

that eateth not, judge him that eateth; for God hath received him." Who art thou that judgeſt another man's ſervant? to his own maſter he ſtandeth or falleth." As if he had ſaid, "Accuſtom not yourſelves to treat with contempt or ſeverity thoſe who differ from you, or even to indulge the thought, that their ſentiments render them unacceptable to the Deity; for know that the great ſearcher of hearts will receive all that are ſincere and conſcientious in their intention, whatever may be their ſpeculative opinions. But who are ye, that thus preſume to decide concerning the rights of conſcience? to uſurp a juriſdiction which can belong only to God? by whoſe righteous ſentence they muſt ſtand or fall."

Such is the connection and deſign of the text; in diſcourſing from which, I ſhall endeavour to explain the general principles, and enforce the univerſal practice of toleration,

ration, by ſhewing that it is in itſelf fit and reaſonable, as well as eſſential to real and genuine Chriſtianity.

Though a ſpirit of toleration has, for ſome time paſt, prevailed within a certain degree, both in our own and other proteſtant countries; yet the univerſal principle upon which it ought to be exerted, ſeems not to have been generally underſtood. Different parties have founded their claim upon ſome particular argument, referring only to themſelves, or at moſt extending to a few whoſe opinions have an affinity to theirs. Some have inſiſted upon their right to it, becauſe of their particular zeal and affection for the conſtitution and government; others, becauſe their religious opinions are orthodox, or differ but little from the eſtabliſhed tenets; ſome, becauſe they are Proteſtants; others, becauſe they are Chriſtians. Now, though all

theſe, in their place, are very cogent arguments for toleration; yet they fall infinitely ſhort of that general principle, upon which it ought to be claimed and granted: and while this remains thus unconſidered, we ought not to be aſtoniſhed that ſome of thoſe who have requeſted and obtained it for themſelves, ſhould be unwilling to have it extended to others.

This principle is clearly expreſſed in the words of the text, "Who art thou that judgeſt another man's ſervant? to his own maſter he ſtandeth or falleth." From which the following propoſitions may naturally be deduced:

That for religious opinions we can be accountable only to God.

That no human authority, whether civil or eccleſiaſtical can, or ought, to lay any penal

penal reſtraint upon the conſciences of men, with regard to their religious profeſſions, or mode of worſhip.

That every man, whatever be his ſentiments of religion, ſo long as he is a peaceable ſubject, and violates none of the laws of decency and morality, has a full right to toleration and protection.

For our religious ſentiments and opinions we can be accountable only to God. The belief of any article of faith muſt depend on conviction, and this on the degree of evidence offered to the mind. To expect therefore, that all ſhall have exactly the ſame faith with regard to every particular tenet of religion, is to expect, that every individual ſhall have not only the ſame arguments offered, without even the leaſt variation in expreſſion, but alſo the ſame conſtitution and temper, the ſame paſſions and prejudices,

dices, the ſame education and opportunities of enquiry, the ſame degree of imagination, judgment, and genius. Until all men are exactly alike in all theſe particulars (and we might as reaſonably expect that all ſhould have exactly the ſame ſtature, voice, and features) they will never exactly agree in their ſentiments of religion. As long as men are fallible beings, diſcovering truth by the ſlow and gradual progreſs of reaſon, and engaging in the purſuit, with different degrees of ability, as well as various tempers and diſpoſitions, ſo long will the great objects of religion appear in various views, not only to different perſons, but to the ſame perſon, at different periods of life; and he may at one time ſincerely and firmly believe to be true, what he afterwards with the ſame ſincerity rejects as erroneous. Examples may be found of perſons, eminent for their learning, abilities, and moral character, who have adhered

hered to religious opinions, in many reſpects, diametrically oppoſite, while each has exhibited the ſtrongeſt proofs of the ſincerity of his attachment to his reſpective principles, by ſubmitting to loſſes, ſufferings, and even to death, in order to eſtabliſh and promote them. When we behold a perſon, who, to a pious and virtuous life, unites ſuch an integrity of diſpoſition, that he had rather ſuffer death, than renounce what he believes true, or profeſs what he deems falſe; ſhall we not ſuppoſe that his ſincerity will render him acceptable to a God of truth and mercy, however erroneous his opinions may have been? Revelation, as well as reaſon, aſſures us, that the Deity regards the heart more than the profeſſion. "In every nation," and ſurely we may add, in every religious ſect, "he that feareth God, and worketh righteouſneſs, is accepted of him." Concerning the truth or falſhood of any doctrines, the

exerciſe

exercise of reason, assisted by revelation, may enable us to determine; but of the sincerity of the professor, none can be a competent judge, except that adorable Being, who knoweth the hearts, and searcheth the thoughts of men. To him alone, therefore, can we be acceptable for the sentiments or mode of our religion.

Hence it will appear, that no human authority, whether civil or ecclesiastical, ought to lay penal restraints on men, with respect to their religious opinions, or mode of worship. The idea, that the magistrate ought, not only to protect the truth, but also to prevent the introduction and propagation of erroneous opinions, has been infinitely detrimental to the cause of virtue and humanity. It were, perhaps, more agreeable to the natural rights of mankind, that government should be entirely indifferent to the mode of religion; that no

denomination ſhould be eſtabliſhed or favored beyond others; and that worthy men of every ſect, ſhould be alike capable of holding civil employments: but this, however plauſible it may ſound in theory, is, in fact, impracticable. Men are naturally partial to thoſe of their own opinions; they are warm in encouraging, and zealous in propagating, what they believe to be truth: the bulk of mankind are more anxious concerning external forms and ceremonies, which are obvious to all, than concerning matters of greater importance, of which a few only are competent judges: hence that indifference of the ſtate, which, at firſt view, ſeems favorable to liberty of conſcience, might, in its effects, be productive of religious tyranny.

Let us for a moment ſuppoſe, that our preſent church eſtabliſhment were aboliſhed; that all perſuaſions met with exactly

actly the ſame countenance and ſupport from government, into which perſons of every ſect might be elected.—What would be the conſequence? Each party, zealous for its own opinions, would endeavour to eſtabliſh them as ſoon as it became poſſeſſed of power. Hence the external rites of religion would be continually changing, and become the ſubject of conſtant diſpute; and though we acknowledge, that theſe are the leaſt eſſential parts of religion, yet they are what operate moſt ſtrongly upon the multitude: nor would theſe debates be confined to the rational diſcuſſion of ſpeculative men, but would agitate and inflame the paſſions of the people, many of whom, in the warmth of their zeal, might ſupply their want of argument by the moſt violent meaſures; and thus the precipitate raſhneſs of fanaticiſm, or the ſullen ferocity of ſuperſtition, might ſilence the ſober voice of reaſon, and endanger the firm, yet decent zeal of true

religion.

religion. It is true that wiſe and moderate men, of every perſuaſion, would exert themſelves to prevent theſe conſequences; yet it is much to be feared, theſe do not compoſe the majority of any religious ſect, eſpecially when heated with contention, or rouzed by a competition of intereſt: but however liberal and tolerant they might be who held the reins of government, the dread, leſt thoſe of oppoſite principles ſhould acquire power, and uſe it to their detriment, would be a ſtrong inducement to neglect no means that might preſerve in a ſtate of inferiority, and even ſubjection, all who differ from them. Nor are all parties equally moderate. Thoſe who hold the moſt abſurd and pernicious opinions, are always the moſt deſirous of confining to themſelves the mercies both of God and man; the moſt zealous to raiſe their own ſect upon the ruin of all the reſt. The influence of ſome furious bigot riſing to power, might fix

fix thoſe in the ſeat of government, whoſe tenets directly lead to intolerance and tyranny: and thus, inſtead of the preſent mild eſtabliſhment, we might once more behold that ſpirit of perſecution, which diſgraced the annals of the commonwealth of England, as well as thoſe of the Tudors and Stuarts.

Some kind of religious eſtabliſhment appears to be uſeful in every nation, to preſerve public order and harmony: what ought to be its particular nature and conſtitution, is an enquiry foreign to my ſubject: every friend to truth would wiſh to ſee it erected on the moſt liberal plan of reaſon and ſcripture, unadulterated with the jargon of ſchool-men, and the contracted bigotry of narrow-minded divines. But whatever may be the requiſitions of any church with reſpect to its own members, the moſt complete and extenſive

toleration

toleration ſhould be granted to all who diſſent from it. Religious opinions, as they muſt ariſe from the convictions of the mind, may be acted upon by argument, but can never be affected by compulſion. This may induce weak or worldly-minded men, from a fear of incurring puniſhment, or from views of intereſt and temporal advantage, to diſſemble their real ſentiments, and aſſume an appearance of orthodoxy; but it will never perſuade the man of integrity and virtue, to alter one tittle of his belief. Thus all reſtraints on conſcience muſt at leaſt be uſeleſs, and evidently defeat their own end.

Of thoſe who affirm, that the civil power ought to guard the true faith, and to prevent the ſpreading of falſe doctrines, and erroneous opinions, we may juſtly demand, who is to decide, which is the true faith, and which are theſe errors? The magiſtrate will

will naturally be prejudiced in favor of his own perſuaſion, and condemn, as erroneous, all who differ from him. Shall the church, in an aſſembly of her clergy, determine this important point?—Alas! their fallibility ſtands recorded in the glaring characters of abſurdity and bigotry, in the hiſtory of every church. And it were to be hoped, that mankind, from fatal experience, are too well convinced of this important truth, ever to ſuffer an aſſembly of Theologiſts of any denomination, thus preſumptuouſly to decide upon opinions, and to determine what mankind ſhall believe. Such deciſions, wherever they have obtained influence, have been fatal to true religion; they are abſurd, and even blaſphemous, in fallible beings; and, when not checked by the civil magiſtrate, have always been productive of religious tyranny and perſecution.

It is only from freedom of thought and liberal inveſtigation, that men can hope to acquire a knowledge of truth; whatever, therefore, prevents, or reſtrains the cauſe, muſt retard and impede the effect. For the juſtice of this obſervation, let me appeal to the experience of paſt ages. Had not a freedom of enquiry inſpired the firſt reformers; had they not nobly dared to think for themſelves, and to propagate their opinions, in direct oppoſition to the reſtraints impoſed upon conſcience by the eccleſiaſtical and civil power, Proteſtantiſm could never have exiſted: and yet many of thoſe who oppoſed the reformation, and perſecuted its adherents, might poſſibly imagine they were defending the true religion, and repreſſing opinions erroneous in themſelves, and dangerous in their conſequences. Nor was Proteſtantiſm the only good effect of this ſpirit of free inveſtigation. Even the church of Rome felt its beneficial

influence

influence; for though it did not reform her errors, it was the means of correcting many of her abuſes. To this, Chriſtianity itſelf is in every view much indebted. Even the arguments by which it has been oppoſed, have eventually been ſerviceable, in bringing religion to the teſt of reaſon, in ſeparating the alloy of ſuperſtition and fanaticiſm, from the pure gold of the goſpel. If more rational principles, and more liberal ſentiments prevail in this, than was the lot of former ages, it is owing to that ſpirit of inquiry, which the objections of Deiſtical writers, have, in ſome meaſure, contributed to excite. Had it been allowed to have ſilenced theſe by the force of either civil or eccleſiaſtical authority, we might ſtill have been immerſed in prejudice and bigotry; but, when it became neceſſary to ſubſtitute the pen for the ſword in defence of Chriſtianity; when its profeſſors were compelled to oppoſe argu-

ment againſt argument; to confute the enemies of their religion, not by the influence of power, but by cool and ſober diſcuſſion; they were obliged to call in common ſenſe as the interpreter of ſcripture, to eſtabliſh faith on the rational foundation of evidence, inſtead of preſcriptive authority: and certain it is, that as mankind ſearch deeply, they will think liberally. Power may ſerve to eſtabliſh falſehood; but reaſon and argument can alone promote the cauſe of truth. True religion never flouriſhed when the coercive authority of the magiſtrate was exerted in its defence; this very circumſtance has always been fatal to its intereſt. If Chriſtianity be truth, it cannot fail to riſe ſuperior to all the arguments which can be urged againſt it: whereas, could it be proved that penal reſtrictions were neceſſary to its eſtabliſhment, we might juſtly conclude, that it was a groſs impoſition on mankind,

and

and every honeſt man would labor to deliver them from the yoke.

Hence it follows, that every individual, ſo long as he is a quiet and peaceable ſubject, whatever be his ſentiments of religion, has a full right to toleration and protection. —Human laws can take cognizance only of overt actions, which are ſubject to the inſpection of mankind, and have an immediate tendency to violate the peace and happineſs of ſociety. Let opinions be ever ſo erroneous, or, in our minds, unfavorable to the practice of morality, ſtill, as mere ſpeculative ſentiments, it would be highly unjuſt to puniſh men for holding them. If ſuch tenets ſhould lead their profeſſors to commit any crimes, the laws of every country have provided adequate penalties, which ought impartially to be inflicted on all who tranſgreſs them. If thoſe be ſincere, who maintain dangerous principles, they

they will more readily yield to argument, than to coercion, which irritates the paſſions, and renders men obſtinate. Perſecution always juſtly raiſes a prejudice in favor of the perſecuted, againſt the perſecuting party; and many fanatical and ſuperſtitious ſects, have increaſed under the moſt violent means uſed for their ſuppreſſion, that, if treated with neglect inſtead of ſeverity, would ſoon have returned to the obſcurity from whence they ſprung. Nothing is retorted with greater eaſe and advantage than intolerance: and as every party concerned aſſumes to itſelf the right of being a judge of its propriety and extent, the ſame arguments which will juſtify it in any one caſe or degree, will as effectually prove it to be right in every inſtance. For, if it be juſt to lay penal reſtraints on Papiſts or Deiſts here, it is equally right, upon the ſame principles, to puniſh men at

Madrid

Madrid for being Proteſtants, or at Conſtantinople for being Chriſtians.

Were intolerance inculcated in the goſpel, it would be an internal evidence ſo ſtrong againſt its divine authority, that even miracles could not induce me to think it otherwiſe than an infamous impoſition; and I ſhould deem it my duty, as openly to renounce and oppoſe Chriſtianity, as I now profeſs and defend it. But the ſpirit of the goſpel, "is firſt pure, then peaceable, gentle, and eaſy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocriſy." Every page of the New Teſtament abounds with precepts of benevolence; nor is there a ſingle paſſage, which can juſtify the laying any reſtraint on the conſciences of men. We are there inſtructed, that mutual love is the grand duty of Chriſtianity, the end of the commandment; we

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are taught to forbear judging and condemning each other, as we would hope to eſcape condemnation ourſelves.

Theſe, and many other precepts of a ſimilar tendency, are ſtrengthened by the example of our bleſſed Lord: he deſpiſed the contemptible bigotry of the Jews, in refuſing to hold with the Samaritans, the friendly intercourſe of converſation and ſocial commerce; he behaved with kindneſs and complacency to the latter, though he had decided the controverſy in favor of the former. When, upon his going up to the feaſt of dedication, the Samaritans would not ſuffer him, at one of their villages, to take that reſt and refreſhment neceſſary to every traveller, his diſciples wiſhed him to puniſh the inhabitants, by ſome ſignal diſplay of miraculous power; to perſuade him to this, they might poſſibly repreſent the Samaritans as Heretics, whoſe opinions he had

condemned

condemned as erroneous, and who added obſtinacy to error: they might inſiſt upon the inefficacy of arguments to effect their converſion; and might urge, that, by calling down fire from heaven, he would not only inflict a juſt puniſhment on the offenders themſelves, but might poſſibly terrify all of their party into an open renunciation of their errors. But notwithſtanding all the ſpecious arguments, that religious zeal and pride could advance in favor of ſeverity, we ſee the bleſſed Jeſus acting a widely different part; we find him rebuking, in the ſtrongeſt terms, this intolerant diſpoſition of his diſciples, telling them, that it was the effect of ignorance, and directly contrary to the deſign of the goſpel; for that "the Son of man came not to deſtroy men's lives, but to ſave them."

Having thus attempted to eſtabliſh the general principles of toleration, I ſhall now

now endeavour to remove ſome objections, which have been raiſed againſt a late repeal of the penal ſtatutes in force againſt thoſe of the Roman Catholic perſuaſion.

I am willing to hope that few, who now wiſh to proteſt againſt repealing theſe ſtatutes, are acquainted with the ſeverity of the penalties they inflict. Theſe were, as an ingenious foreigner obſerves, ſo rigorous, "though not profeſſedly of the ſanguinary kind, that they do all the injury that can poſſibly be done in cold blood." In ſhort, they were odious and deteſtable, a diſgrace to our ſtatutes, and a reproach to our nation. Much has been ſaid to excuſe and juſtify them, from the circumſtances of the times, in which they were enacted. A prince of the Romiſh communion, who, by the moſt oppreſſive and cruel meaſures, endeavoured to eſtabliſh his intolerant party on the ruin of our civil and religious liberties,

liberties, had then been lately compelled to abdicate the throne. As long as either he, or his deſcendents, were in a condition to diſturb the peace of ſociety, by their unjuſtifiable and abſurd claim to the crown of Great-Britain, it became neceſſary, in our own defence, to lay ſuch reſtrictions on the Catholics, as might incapacitate men, whoſe principles favored the ſubverſion of our conſtitution, from thus injuring the public. On this ground alone could penal laws againſt any religious opinion be vindicated: yet not even theſe reaſons could juſtify the exceſſive ſeverity, which diſtinguiſhed the ſtatutes now repealed.

But this danger can no longer be urged. The houſe of Stuart, as oppoſed to that of Brunſwick, is reduced to ſo low an ebb, as to be an object of pity and contempt, rather than of alarm and reſentment. As, therefore, the political neceſſity of penal laws

no longer ſubſiſts, it was but right to repeal what nothing, except that, could excuſe.

It will, perhaps, be ſaid, that theſe ſtatutes, from the moderation of the times, would never have been exerted: but if this be true, why ſhould they not be repealed? It can hardly be ſuppoſed, that any would be ſo entirely inconſiſtent in their conduct, as to petition government againſt the abrogation of laws, which they intended ſhould never be carried into execution. Beſides, until theſe acts were annulled, it was in the power of any contemptible informer, to oblige the magiſtrate to enforce them in all their rigor. And, as a late learned writer juſtly obſerves, "it ought not to be left in the breaſt of every mercileſs bigot, to drag down the vengeance of theſe occaſional laws, upon inoffenſive, though miſtaken, ſubjects; in oppoſition to

the lenient inclinations of the magiſtrate, and to the deſtruction of every principle of toleration and religious liberty." The Roman Catholics will be more likely to love and ſupport a conſtitution, under which they poſſeſs the rights common to every other ſubject, than one, by which they are oppreſſed, and liable to be ill treated on account of their religious opinions. Still, however, let them be incapacitated from taking any part, in either the legiſlative, or executive authority of government: ſtill let them be incapable of holding any civil employments. A knowledge of their bigoted attachment to their own ſuperſtition, and a regard for the ſafety of our civil and religious liberties, leads us to hope, that no power will ever be granted to them: but with regard to the mere profeſſion of their religion, every friend to freedom of conſcience, will wiſh to ſee them enjoy it in common with others; though

though it muſt be confeſſed, that they of all men have the leaſt claim to it.

With regard to the apprehenſions concerning the increaſe of Popery, with which many needleſsly terrify themſelves, they ſeem to be totally void of foundation. It is by no means certain that its influence does not rather decreaſe than otherwiſe; or that it will ſpread more when it is openly, than while it was ſecretly profeſſed. But however this may be, it ought to be diligently oppoſed, not by the power of the magiſtrate, but by the ſtrength of argument. It now becomes, more particularly, the duty of the Proteſtant clergy, to guard their hearers frequently and ſeriouſly againſt its errors; to ſhew the abſurdity and evil tendency of its doctrines and principles; to be no leſs diligent in diffuſing the rational dictates of true religion, than the Romaniſts are in propagating their errors:

errors; and above all, in oppoſition to that ſpirit of perſecution, which is the worſt character of Popery, ought we to inculcate diſpoſitions of lenity and mildneſs, forbearance and charity. If the Romiſh church is intolerant, let not this be the diſgrace of Proteſtants. We ought "not to render evil for evil, but ſhould overcome evil with good."

That perſons of every different perſuaſion may live together in perfect harmony under common laws, and united by common intereſts, is evident from the example of a neighbouring republic; where thoſe of every religious party, whether Papiſts or Proteſtants, meet with equal protection; and, as long as they diſturb not the peace and good order of ſociety, may openly worſhip God, in the manner moſt agreeable to their conſcience.

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Would we wiſh to prevent the growth of Popery, perhaps toleration is the moſt effectual method. Reſtraints ſerve only to ſtrengthen the prejudices, and to inflame the zeal of thoſe on whom they are laid: while, on the contrary, tolerant principles produce moderation in thoſe tolerated; even their religious prejudices yield to that mutual eſteem and affection, which liberal converſation never fails to excite; and their zeal, no longer kept alive by the merit of ſuffering, abates and cools: one grand foundation of diſſent is loſt, and, by degrees, they grow indifferent to the principles on which they differ from us. Theſe appear to be the natural gradations, by which the prejudices and errors of all parties will be aboliſhed, and the true religion of the heart and life erected on their ruins. Theſe are the means by which we muſt endeavour after that union, which ſhall render us all of one mind, not as to ſpeculative opinions,

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for in theſe men will ever differ; but with reſpect to the practice of piety and benevolence: when we ſhall no longer diſtinguiſh ourſelves by the name of any particular ſect; but all to be ambitious to deſerve the noble titles of children of the univerſal Parent of nature, the God, whoſe eſſence is love and mercy, and the followers of that Chriſt, by whom his compaſſion was manifeſted to mankind.

F I N I S.

for in these men will ever differ; but with regard to the practice of piety and benevolence: when we shall no longer distinguish ourselves by the name of any particular sect; but all to be ambitious to deserve the noble titles of children of the universal Parent of nature, and of God, whole essence is love and mercy, and the followers of that Christ, by whom his contrivance was manifested to mankind.

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FINIS.